FRESH AIR: LITERATURE FOR INTERNATIONAL SCHOLARS

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Abstract

Numerous arguments have been made in support of literature for language instruction of all types, including English for Academic Purposes (Hirvela, 1990). Extensive reading (Day& Bamford, 1998) is proposed to enhance reading fluency, vocabulary competence, and the enjoyment of reading. Both proposals seem promising for international scholars, increasingly required to communicate in English (Pérez-Llantada, 2012). In this preliminary study, an extensive reading approach involving literary texts was employed in English classes for EAL scholars. Results suggest that literature enhances classroom interactions, and extensive reading, after considerable orientation, did lead to an increase in reading outside of scholars' specialized fields.

Keywords: Literature and language education, Extensive reading, EAL scholars.

1 Introduction

University professors are being increasingly called upon to use English in a wide variety of ways, and these are not limited to formal, academic registers (Fernández Polo & Cal Varela, 2009; Pérez-Llantada, Plo& Ferguson, 2011; Uzuner, 2008). Conference participation, for example, includes informal socializing activities, and increased teaching responsibilities in English also require personal interactions of a less formal nature. Given the increasingly international nature of academia, cultural awareness is also taking on greater importance. It is not surprising, then, that the literature reports that international scholars often complain about problems with general English issues (Fernández Polo& Cal Varela, 2009; Pérez-Llantada et al., 2011). In addition, scholars have expressed a desire and a need for greater competence with general English in order to enable more complete communication with all types of English speakers, both English as an Additional Language (EAL heretofore) users as well as native speakers (Sung-Yul Park& Wee, 2011). Several papers have also reported on EAL scholars' frustration about not being able to use colloquial language, express humor, and interact informally in English in the course of their professional activities (Pérez-Llantada et al., 2011; Tardy, 2004).

The literature presents more specific details about the types of language difficulties faced by EAL scholars. Ferguson, et al (2011) cite numerous studies in which the

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following difficulties are described: "less rich vocabulary" and "less facility in expression", word choice and sentence structure, modality in English, misplaced sentence openers, misuse of time expressions, and the use of complex subordinate clauses in argumentation. Furthermore, two studies focusing on the Spanish context (Pérez-Llantada et al., 2011; Fernández Polo & Cal Varela, 2009) highlight problems with general English issues, such as the use of everyday vocabulary, and expressing nuances of meaning. With these needs in mind, a preliminary study was carried out in which literary texts and extensive reading were important components of English language classes for engineering scholars at a Spanish university.

1.1 Literature in language education

In terms of how literature contributes to language learning, Littlewood (1986) identifies five "perspectives". Of particular interest is the third perspective which deals with textual information such as the events, situations, and characters portrayed by the writer. Littlewood convincingly argues that this aspect marks the point at which literature stands out from other types of texts in terms of its benefits for language learning. Literary texts recount compelling stories that reflect human experience and thus serve to overcome the problem of providing natural and authentic contexts for language learning. As Littlewood says, language use in storytelling creates its own context (Littlewood, 1986: 179):

A major problem of language teaching in the classroom is the creation of an authentic situation for language. A language classroom, especially one outside the community of native speakers, is isolated from the context of events and situations which produce natural language. In the case of literature, language creates its own context.

The use of literature in language education is also justified by the fact that a clear separation between literary and nonliterary language is no longer considered valid (Butler, 2006; Hall, 2005; Paran, 2006). As Paran (2006: 2-3) writes:

It is now widely accepted that there is no clear demarcation between literary and nonliterary texts but rather a cline of literariness. Thus it is possible to discuss the same phenomena in literary and nonliterary texts. This has resulted in a widening of the genres that are being used, with writers juxtaposing different genres in order to understand the way each functions.

McRae (1991) adds that literary texts (representational texts, in his terminology) are useful in language instruction as they provide learners with ongoing recall, reflection and reference. Such "revisiting" of language elements and phrases certainly seems valuable for language learning.

Another motivating factor was simply the fact that these English learners possess the requisite level to understand a large percentage of literary texts written in English. It seems illogical to ignore such a rich source of linguistic and cultural material, especially when the learner group highlights the need for general English, vocabulary enrichment, greater understanding of humor, etc., all of which are well represented in literary texts.

Turning to vocabulary, a finding in Wolf (Wolf, 2010: 154) provides additional support for encouraging publishing academics in L2 English to read texts, both literary and otherwise, from outside of their field. It has been determined that the more aspects, meanings, and associations one possesses about a word, the faster one reads it. In addition, the resultant rich linguistic neural network is reflected in physical changes in the brain. Part of this, i.e. being able to read familiar words faster, may seem obvious. What seems less so is that this vocabulary competence is enhanced by having experience with words in as many of their meanings, contexts, registers, etc, as possible. Wolf (2010: 154) put it this way:

Finnish researchers found that the upper temporal lobe regions involved in both phonological and semantic processing activate more quickly for words on the "established" end of this continuum. And, as noted earlier, the "richer" a semantic "neighborhood" (associated words and meanings that contribute to our knowledge about a word), the faster we recognise a word.

There is, in addition, the notion that approaches to literature education have changed substantially since many of the university professors working today were in school. One of these more current approaches is Reader-Response, based on Rosenblatt's highly influential theory which proposes that the meaning of a literary work arises from the reader interacting with the text. Another important change in literature education is the widening of the canon, reflected in McRae's title (1991), *Literature with a Small l*. Until relatively recently, the canon was a limited selection of the literary output of the English-speaking world, consisting predominantly of male writers from Inner Circle nations. As Paran (2006) indicates, writers from the outer circle are now commonly included in the course program in all contexts, i.e., outer circle and inner circle countries as well as EFL contexts.

1.2 Extensive reading

Benefits to these participants were also envisioned by introducing them to extensive reading, according to the principles outlined by Day& Bamford (1998). The authors define this approach in a simple and straightforward way (1998: 6) – "An extensive reading approach aims to get students reading in the second language and liking it". In order to achieve this goal, they propose that learners self-select their reading material, and that the level be well within their linguistic abilities. Dictionary use is strongly discouraged as the goal is large amounts of

fluent reading, rather than reading for accuracy. What is encouraged is enjoyment, and to help ensure this, learners are encouraged to abandon any text that is found to be less than satisfying. Through all these aspects, it is also hoped that motivation to read in the second language is enhanced. In the service of this, Day& Bamford (1998: 7) seek to separate this enjoyable reading from standard evaluation techniques – in their terms, "reading is its own reward". Instructors working within this approach are called upon to orient learners and to assist them with getting the most out of their reading, rather than spend time on testing.

The texts within this approach should present no more than five problems per page so as to facilitate fluency in reading. In this way, learners should improve their vocabulary in two ways: known vocabulary is reinforced, and unknown terms can often be guessed from contextual clues. Reinforcing known, or "sight vocabulary" is an important part of this approach as Day& Bamford claim that "reading begins with the accurate, swift, and automatic visual recognition of vocabulary, independent of the context in which it occurs" (1998: 12). For this reason, rereading of texts is a recommended part of the approach. In addition, simplified texts are well-regarded materials within extensive reading. In fact, Day& Bamford propose that texts written with the language learner in mind, such as graded readers, constitute a genre in its own right (1998: 64). They term this genre, "language learner literature", and argue that it is on par with other genres that often include texts written in relatively simple language, such as children's or young adult fiction.

While a comfortable reading level is certainly part of the approach, this does not mean that texts present no difficulty. In fact, part of the goals of learner orientation proposed by Day& Bamford (1998: 120) include "going for meaning", that is, remaining focused on the overall meaning of what is being read without getting sidetracked by unfamiliar language or ideas", and "being satisfied, when appropriate, with less than total comprehension". In this way, extensive reading in a foreign language is not that different from comfortable reading in one's first language.

2. Methodology – Texts and comfortable reading

Given the reasons stated above, literature was included in weekly English classes with a small group of learners from an engineering research group. In addition, these learners were introduced to extensive reading, as defined by Day& Bamford (1988). These two components formed part of a preliminary study designed to explore the following research questions:

- Would the inclusion of literature in English language classes be especially enjoyable and motivating for EAL scholars?
- Would an introduction to extensive reading lead to more reading of general and literary texts in L2 English?

- Would these reading activities assist in improving their writing in terms of lexicogrammatical issues?

The study was carried out during the 2011-12 academic year with a group of five graduate students and professors of an engineering research group at a university in northern Spain. The leader of the group approached me for conversation classes for himself and some other members of the group, to which I suggested adding reading and writing activities. As seen in other studies (Fernández Polo& Cal Varela, 2009; Pérez-Llantada, Plo& Ferguson, 2011), these scholars manifested a particular interest in developing their speaking abilities, and this came out in numerous ways throughout the year.

Weekly sessions were held which lasted from an hour to an hour and a half. The classes were unofficial, not linked to any degree or certificate program, and attendance was voluntary. The author of this paper was the sole instructor. In addition to reading and discussing literary texts, some time was devoted to their academic writing. This mainly involved peer review exercises of completed research article drafts prior to submitting them to journals. Most of our sessions were held in a classroom at the faculty, however, on an occasional basis we met in a cafeteria either at the school or nearby. This was done in order to enhance the motivational, and hopefully pleasurable aspect of the approach.

In order to assist them with their self-selected reading, and to collect data, they were asked to keep a concise reading log. At a minimum, it consisted of the title of the text, the amount of daily reading, and a brief note about the reading if they were so inclined. In response to their understandable complaints about lack of time for pleasure reading, I suggested a daily minimum of 15 minutes. In terms of the reading material, I complemented their self-selected reading with numerous literary texts, such as poems, short stories, and extracts from larger works, with the goal of opening their minds to exploring other genres than those that they were most accustomed to. Moreover, reading the same text made it possible to discuss a work in class in a deeper way.

3. Results and discussion

In terms of the first research question, classroom observation indicates that the use of literature is positive in various ways. Given the exploratory nature of this study, no specific, quantitative measurement tool was part of the classroom observation. Rather, it was qualitative in nature, and included such issues as amount of interaction, enthusiasm manifested by the learners, requests for similar materials, etc. As reported in the literature (Belcher & Hirvela, 2000; Diaz-Santos, 2000; Hirvela, 1990) there was evidence of increased engagement with literary texts. One text that provoked a good deal of response was the poem “This Be The Verse” by Philip Larkin. While the learners were clearly intrigued by the slang and curse

words in the poem, they were also interested in the underlying themes. It was quite satisfying to hear these EAL scholars comment on "the dark vision of existence" evoked by this poem as they entered class the week after we worked with it. A far bleaker poem, "Dulce et Decorum Est", by the British World War I poet, Wilfred Owen, also stimulated lively discussion. After commenting on the tragedy and suffering brought about by the war, several participants discussed family experiences and memories from the Spanish Civil War. Such engagement and response to a text is much more likely with fictional accounts than with purely informational texts (Butler, 2006).

The case of poetry was particularly interesting in that what the learners said about it did not match with what I observed when we worked with it in class. Not surprisingly, as seen in other studies (Hirvela& Boyle, 1988), these learners said that they did not particularly like poetry. However, when we worked with a poem in class, the learners were often actively involved, asked insightful questions, and appeared to be enjoying themselves. In fact, after our class on the Larkin poem, I asked whether the participants felt that poetry was useful for them. I was surprised by the enthusiastic response of "Absolutely" that I received. The head of the research group then went on to say that poems were good because they were short and self-sufficient narratives that could be covered in one session, and that were very useful for pronunciation. He then concluded by again referring to the "cynical, dark view of life" in the Larkin poem, providing a good example of the ongoing recall of literary texts referred to by McRae (1991).

Access to quality reading materials appeared to be a problem for the participants in these sessions, and this was something that I did not anticipate given their educational achievements and high-level computer skills. This came out during one of our final sessions in June when several members of the group expressed resistance to spending time reading during class because weren't particularly interested in what they were reading at the time. Upon further discussion, it became apparent that finding satisfying texts to read was not as straightforward as I originally thought. Various problems were cited, such as lack of time to search for texts on the web, preference to read printed material over internet texts, and paucity of material in the university library.

The second research question produced somewhat mixed results. First of all, some evidence of positive reactions to reading general texts from outside of their specialized field was found. One particularly positive comment came in response to the survey question, "What did you like most about these sessions?":

I like that since I attend sessions I have read more in English than in all my life, I try to search more things in English to practice and at least once a week I can listen and speak in English with other people.

Extensive reading in English seemed to be a novel phenomenon for this group of learners, in general. Of the five participants, four of them indicated that their

English language reading involved only field-specific scientific texts prior to our classes. By the end of the course, most of these engineering scholars indicated on the survey that they had adopted the habit of extensive reading in English.

This, however, was not easily achieved. One very interesting finding was a clear confirmation for Day& Bamford's (1998: 92) warning that learners are highly resistant to engaging in easy, pleasurable reading, opting instead to continue struggling with texts that are either difficult or deemed "useful". Though copies of the principles of extensive reading were distributed at the beginning of the year, and these guidelines were often discussed in class, it was necessary to continue clarifying them until the end of our sessions. It does indeed seem to be the case that learners adopt the common perspective, "no pain, no gain", to such a degree that they are unable to even consider the possibility that relatively easy reading could be worthwhile.

One example of this took place during a class in May when we began with 10 minutes of individual, silent reading. One participant had not brought any reading to class so he went to his office and came back with a computer programming textbook. A debate then ensued as to whether such a text was suitable for extensive reading or not. Based on the participant's assurances that he was reading the text for enjoyment, the debate was considered settled. Questions about extensive reading came up again just moments later when the issue of abandoning a text was raised. The majority of the learners cited the importance of a text for one's work as being a key issue in making this determination. Though I continued to stress that, in terms of extensive reading, enjoyment is the deciding factor in continuing, or not, with a given text, they did not seem to be with me. Furthermore, we had been reviewing this very point since the beginning of the year.

Another finding that may indicate a somewhat ambivalent response to reading is that two of the participants did not exceed the minimum of 15 minutes a day of reading that I had suggested – and limited this to Monday to Friday. Also, as mentioned above, little enthusiasm was shown for silent reading time in class. While this may relate to feelings about reading, it may also be related to their clear interest in improving their speaking, which they usually did instead of reading during these sessions.

The types of materials these learners selected for their extensive reading varied from news articles to recipe books to novels. Though I envisioned that literary texts would be particularly appealing, they were not the first choice of most participants in these classes.

In terms of the third research question, literary and general English texts did prove useful to assist these learners with lexicogrammatical aspects of their English, both written and oral. The use of the article in English would be one example. While revising their research articles, I often had trouble determining whether there was a problem with article usage or not as I did not understand the text well enough. In

addition, this issue is rather problematic for Spanish speakers as article usage differs from that in English (e.g., the general statement "I like beer", and the more specific "I like the beer", take the same form in Spanish). Poetry provided very useful material to illustrate the meaning clarification that this simple and common English feature provides. Besides providing a clear context for article usage in the title, "This Be The Verse" by Philip Larkin, the poem includes another effective occurrence in the first stanza:

> *They fill you with the faults they had*
> *And add some extra just for you.*

The fact that they seemed to enjoy the poem probably enhanced their interest in considering language options, such as "the" in this case instead of "some", or nothing.

It must be admitted that relatively little was done with this research question partly because participants did not bring samples of their academic writing to class, choosing instead to wait until an article was written and then present it to me for review. Though I urged them to take advantage of the classes to work together on writing samples or to explore questions about their writing, nobody followed this suggestion. Instead, they gave me completed article drafts to review on an individual basis. A certain reliance on the "expert role" of the native speaker teacher seemed to be a big part of the explanation. The learners appeared to have little confidence in the ability of classmates to provide much assistance with their texts. This was particularly surprising to me as many issues in their texts related to matters of content.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, this preliminary study suggests that the inclusion of literary texts in English language classes for EAL scholars was enjoyable and motivating. Extensive reading in L2 English proved to be new to these learners, and it did lead to an increase in reading texts outside of scholars' specialized fields. Literary texts, however, were not generally chosen for this voluntary reading.

There were clearly limitations to this initial study, an important one being time. One hour a week seems wholly inadequate to truly determine the impact of new approaches to reading on English language learning for busy academics. The fact that these were voluntary classes as well, for which the participants received no credit, certificate or other official recognition for their transcript may have also impacted on the effectiveness of the approach. It should also be mentioned that several of the participants were also involved in other classes at the same time (and often of a more official nature), and this probably interfered with full commitment to these classes. And lastly, a higher degree of structure would have been preferable relating to various matters, such as text selection and providing

extensive reading materials to the learners. All these issues should be considered for future empirical studies which are not only called for in the literature but also seem justified by this small study.

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